

KEEP A FOCUS ON MEANINGFUL REFORM EFFORTS INSTEAD OF POLITICAL AGENDAS

Abstract

This article draws contrasts between useful, research-based recommendations for the further development and assessment of teacher- and leader-preparation programs and those studies aiming at total “reform” that are frequently distinguished by their questionable methods, faulty assumptions, and complete disregard for the established research in this field. An example of such faulty research driven by a clearly political agenda is the survey of Illinois teacher preparation programs performed in 2010 by the National Council on Teacher Quality. The NCTQ study’s methodology is presented in detail, as are the study’s ad hoc demands for further, asymmetrical information from the institutions being studied. These demands for information themselves contrast with the minimal information available on NCTQ membership and aims. School leaders are advised to question any reform initiative that seems primarily designed to seize the attention of the mass media and politicians.

Every year, the loud cries for education reform seem more shrill, and that shrillness demands attention more effectively from mass media and from politicians. Some of that attention has resulted in heated debate about the best course to take for our schools and for the education of children in the United States. As is often the case when social institutions in this country are being critiqued, public expressions of opinion and analyses tend to spring forth from all sides of an issue, and to begin circulating too rapidly. This certainly describes the discourse surrounding public schooling in the United States for the past several decades, launched in earnest after the publication of the historic 1983 report on the status of American Education, *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983).

Adding new intensity to this debate was passage of the *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) Act of 2001, a bill authorized by the federal government that served to extend this debate, one which today has grown into a boisterous and sometimes heated conversation about what educational reform measures are best to pursue (NCLB, 2002). In the United States we pride ourselves on educating every child regardless of race, ability, socioeconomic level, or any other characteristic. Of course, the challenge in all of this banter is to keep ourselves focused on the question of who stands to gain or to be hurt by the outcomes of these reform efforts. It is our children who rely on this society to do what is best for them in order to facili-

tate their learning and development. What is at stake in this reform climate is the educational health and well-being of an entire generation of school children. With that in mind, we must keep this priority first when considering any plan that grows out of our efforts and concerns about reform.

While eager reformers pitch a wide array of remedies that surface during these discussions, the dedicated professionals responsible for undertaking such reform measures must monitor the quality and credibility of input that might impact our schools and the children who attend them. Such monitoring is critically needed in regards to the current efforts of the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ). This group has launched “inspections” of teacher preparation programs in about ten states, with the ultimate goal of extending this exercise to the entire country. It is certainly an ambitious mission, but what do we know about this group? In an effort to understand this approach, several questions are posed and addressed to offer a clearer picture of this group of critics. First of all, who is NCTQ, and what are the underlying assumptions of their work? Related to that question, what does NCTQ mean by teacher quality? Is their methodology reliable, and what can we take away from this going forward?

Who is NCTQ?

Although there is a good deal of consensus among experts in the field of education that reform is a necessary and desirable function of maintaining any effective educational system, consumers of the information produced by self-appointed reformers need to look beneath the surface of these reports. NCTQ has harshly criticized every program they have reviewed. End users of these critiques may certainly question why this group would advance what appears to be a public attack on the conventional education establishment in this country. One answer to this question is that there is clearly a particular agenda that drives this condemnation of the public education enterprise being promoted by this group. In an effort to understand that agenda, consider the people and organizations affiliated with this collection of critics.

In order to better understand their critique, it is useful to take a look at who some of the associates of this organization are. The NCTQ website lists its board of directors, and that list warrants a closer look. Stacey Boyd is chairwoman of the board. According to the NCTQ website, Ms. Boyd was the founding director and principal of a charter school in Boston. Chester E. Finn, Jr., another board member, “...is a long-time conservative critic of public education, schools of education, educational leadership programs, and teacher unions” (English, 2010). Marti Watson Garlett was the Founding Dean of the Teachers College at Western Governors University, an online degree granting entity where students can receive credit for life experience and demonstrated (presumably by examination) competencies. Even this small sample points toward the agenda

that is common among the supporters of this group. The list includes individuals who actively work to promote the dismantling of our public education system as we know it, and to replace that system with privatized vendors competing for taxpayer dollars to do so.

A review of the NCTQ advisory board reveals representatives of several conservative foundations and institutes which focus on funneling financial resources to educational reform groups that attack the American public schools and higher education programs, and which support so-called reformers who seek little more than to privatize our national education system. Some of those individuals include E.D. Hirsch, Jr. (Core Knowledge Foundation), Wendy Kopp (Teach for America), Frederick M. Hess (American Enterprise Institute), Stefanie Sanford (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation), and Eric A. Hanushek (The Hoover Institution), to name but a few.

NCTQ board member Chester E. Finn, Jr., has made a career of criticizing public education and attacking colleges of education. He is the president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, one of many groups that exists to advance a neo-liberal agenda. Neo-liberalism is a common philosophy that urges private sector control of markets and many social institutions, including schools. Finn, along with others, promotes strategies that serve to invalidate the public school system in the United States and further the notion of school choice and the privatization of education (English, 2010).

There are fundamental differences in ideology between this group and the programs of teacher and school leader preparation at institutions of higher education across the United States. Within the NCTQ circle are self-appointed critics who seek to impose upon the public various forms of neo-liberalism and elitist conservatism. Neo-liberalism can be seen in a sometimes purely anti-establishment agenda that seeks to diminish the role of teacher unions, promote merit pay for teachers based upon standardized test scores, and denounce schools of education and educators for delivering programs that do not meet their biased, unfounded and self-defined standards (Sawchuck, 2009).

Their counterparts in the elitist conservative camp are those traditionalists who advance the idea that society is best served by re-locating virtually all leadership and decision-making power under the purview of the intellectual elite. "These elitist conservatives fancy themselves as holding onto the cultural icons and heritage that they believe everyone should know and that constituted some cultural apogee or golden days" (English, 2010). Regardless of which camp these critics align themselves with, it is clear that there is an agenda here that is carefully designed to shift the public's support for a strong public school system in this country to support for a system housed in the private sector, where the chasm between those who have and those who have not would most likely grow even wider.

What are the Underlying Assumptions?

According to the NCTQ website, this organization is a self-appointed advocacy entity that was formed to address policy reform for teacher education at local, state, and national levels. The underlying assumption that undergirds NCTQ's research and policy work is that current university-based teacher education programs are inadequate and in dire need of reform. NCTQ views itself as an alternative to current teacher organizations. Its goal is to challenge standard teacher preparation programs and state boards of education. The push for alternative certification programs outside the realm of the university is explicit in many of the publications posted on their website. NCTQ appears to discount any research that has been done that demonstrates the positive impact of teachers from university-based teacher preparation programs, such as the work of Darling-Hammond, Holtzman, Gatlin and Heilig (2005).

NCTQ also operates under the assumption that current professional standards such as those established by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC), and numerous other specialized professional education associations are inadequate and not rigorous enough. They provide no evidence that this is the case, but they assume this premise and promote that faulty perception nonetheless. NCTQ has decided that their own standards, each of which has a limited research foundation and has not been subjected to a rigorous peer-review, provide a stronger metric by which to evaluate teacher preparation programs. Once again, no evidence is available to support that assertion, yet they continue to simply assert its truth. This misconception results in data and research that provide very limited information, with very questionable validity and reliability.

What is Evidence of Teacher Quality?

For two centuries the purpose of a good public education has been to produce an educated and well-informed citizenry. For decades, professionals involved in teacher preparation work have studied the input factors that comprise effective programs to prepare quality teachers who would, in turn, educate the greater citizenry of this country. Teacher quality may be defined in different ways according to differences in philosophy or perspective, with criteria ranging from specific content area coursework to ratings of baccalaureate institutions where a teacher earned initial certification. In some cases this attempt to pin down the exact "ingredients" to include in teacher education programs has launched studies that explored, say, the impact of experience or the impact of earning an advanced degree on the quality of teaching (DeAngelis, Presley, & White, 2005). These reviews of inputs have resulted in much discussion, but have produced very little useful information to use in restructuring teacher education programs.

On January 8, 2002, the *No Child Left Behind Act* was signed by President George W. Bush. This bipartisan bill called for greater accountability from the nation's public schools. This legislation caused a shift away from defining teacher quality in terms of inputs delivered through a teacher preparation program and a shift toward measuring the effectiveness of teachers by examining student achievement outcomes. Standardized testing would be the tool used to measure these student achievement results. This significant change in focus resulted in a revamping of the metrics used to calibrate teacher preparation programs, and focused them on evidence of improvement in student learning.

Since this shift to outcomes places attention on the scores students achieve on standardized tests, it would seem reasonable that the act of linking those student scores to teacher effectiveness would not be a difficult process to accomplish. In reality, this effort to assess teacher quality by linking student standardized test scores to the teacher has become a far more provocative and difficult undertaking than originally assumed. Value-added analysis is meant to determine the amount of academic growth a student has achieved during one year in a particular teacher's classroom.

Yet value-added analyses focus narrowly on standardized tests, usually in math and English Language Arts. These tests give important information about student learning, but they ignore much learning that matters to students, parent, and teachers. That's why it can be a useful tool, but cannot possibly stand alone as a measure of "effectiveness" (Rogers, 2010).

The very notion of "learning that matters" that Rogers (2010) refers to has been a contentious one throughout the history of public schooling (e.g., Kliebard, 2004). While most classroom teachers and teacher educators no doubt agree that mathematics and English Language Arts content are crucial, such curriculum emphases are certainly not the only ones needed to prepare young people for fulfilling and productive lives (and to be globally competitive) in the 21st century. Whether or not one believes that all children should be college- or career-ready when they graduate from high school, other content should certainly be considered. As Rogers suggests, some of these other emphases do not lend themselves readily to pencil-and-bubble standardized tests, or even to standardized tests that incorporate essays that are so time- and cost-intensive to evaluate. Indeed, some learning can perhaps only be authentically assessed in the context of classroom life; consequently, some curriculum and assessment decisions can best be made by (reflective and highly qualified) classroom teachers and school administrators themselves.

While one can easily think here of other content areas besides mathematics and English Language Arts, the focus can also be on expectations for learning that do not necessarily reside in any one content area. For example, students will learn to: identify and solve problems and make decisions related to aspects of life inside and outside the classroom that are

personally meaningful to them; actively engage in civic literacy projects that foster a more democratic and just society (Teitelbaum, 2010); be sensitive to and respectful as appropriate to the diverse cultural backgrounds of others in and out of one's own community; adopt imaginative and creative approaches to represent and share perspectives on deeply-felt personal and social issues (Greene, 1995); play and collaborate with others in ways that embrace caring, concern and connection (Martin, 1995); clarify one's own values and act in ways that abide by some sense of a meaningful and defensible moral compass; and, significantly, take responsibility for one's own learning.

Are there sound arguments to be made that such expectations for learning should be priorities even if they cannot be authentically assessed on standardized tests? Is it the case that such tests have in essence relegated such important learning opportunities to the sidelines of the country's classrooms (Teitelbaum & Brodsky, 2008)? Is it vital to encourage prospective and current teachers to be able to engage knowledgeably and meaningfully in conversations about such critical issues of teaching and learning, indeed more crucial than whether or not education students use the same methods textbook when learning how to teach reading to fourth graders? Responding affirmatively to each of these questions, as we do, may seem to complicate matters of teacher education but what such responses actually do is highlight the fundamental need to avoid simplistic commentaries and evaluations in addressing what needs to be done to improve the preparation of our teachers and the learning of our children.

Indeed, beyond the contentious issue of what learning matters most, there appears to a growing consensus that standardized testing alone is not the panacea to establishing a direct link between teachers' effectiveness and their students' performance on these tests. The essence of teacher quality goes beyond this partial picture of the impact a teacher has on the achievement of students as seen through the score on a test taken on one day of the school year, under varying conditions that may not be within the teacher's ability to control or even influence.

There appears to be common agreement that standardized testing alone is not the panacea that might establish a direct link between teachers' effectiveness and their students' performance on these tests. The essence of teacher quality goes beyond this partial picture of the impact a teacher has on the achievement of students as seen through one score on one test on one day. According to an investigation done by Linda Darling-Hammond at Stanford University, there is much evidence that professional educators and researchers in the field of teacher preparation in fact do have agreement on the qualities and attributes that are important to nurture in a beginning teacher.

Several aspects of teacher qualifications have been found to bear some relationship to student achievement: (1) general academic and verbal ability, (2) subject matter knowledge, (3) knowledge

about teaching and learning as reflected in teacher education courses or preparation experiences, (4) teaching experience, and (5) the combined set of qualifications measured by teacher certification, which generally includes the preceding factors (Darling-Hammond, 2006).

Although these aspects represent some of the standard features upon which teacher education programs are developed, in addition these programs assure that teacher candidates engage in intensive and extensive field experiences as well as in the acquisition of cultural knowledge—a type of knowledge frequently demeaned and diminished in the rhetoric and discourse of neo-liberals, by the way. It is important that these foundational elements be grounded in research that affords a degree of confidence that these elements produce the intended influence on student learning and growth. It is counterproductive to base programs on standards that are derived by relying upon such dubious methods as what appears to the self-appointed to constitute “common sense,” or superficially “reasonable” conclusions.

The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) is recognized by the U.S. Department of Education as a national accrediting body for higher education institutions that prepare teachers and school leaders. The work of this organization focuses on the development of research-based standards for preparation programs to assure that its member institutions are producing the caliber of professional educators that our society needs to educate its citizenry. These standards are extensive and are based upon the assertion that all children can learn.

NCATE standards (NCATE Professional Standards, 2008) that specifically address teacher quality include preparing teachers who:

- acquire the necessary content, pedagogical, and professional knowledge and skills to teach both independently and collaboratively
- are prepared to teach a diverse community of students
- can integrate technology into instruction to enhance student learning; teach to P–12 student standards set by specialized professional associations and the states
- explain instructional choices based on research-derived knowledge and best practice
- apply effective methods of teaching students who are at different developmental stages, have different learning styles, and come from diverse backgrounds; reflect on practice and act on feedback; have a broad liberal arts education
- pursue in-depth study of the subject they plan to teach
- possess a foundation of professional and pedagogical knowledge upon which to base instruction decisions
- complete diverse, well planned, and sequenced workplace experiences in P–12 schools.

Teacher quality indicators must reflect the qualities that are already known to provide evidence of a competent and effective educator. Without the use of such evidence, children in schools become the subjects of arbitrary trial and error exercises. Because each student is a unique, developing human being who comes to school with a variety of individual differences, the techniques and strategies used in a classroom must be tailored to individual developmental levels, learning styles, and cultural elements. As serious educational researchers have learned, one size does not fit all. James Baker, Superintendent of Schools in Erie, Pennsylvania, describes the teachers that our P-12 students need: "These teachers are the new knowledge workers of the 21st century: those who respond to multi-language, multiethnic, multiracial, and multicultural challenges by adjusting their instructional sails to their students' learning courses, their profiles, and their varying performances" (Barker, 2004).

Is NCTQ Methodology Credible?

University-based teacher preparation programs have been under intense scrutiny over the past two decades. In order to justify their relevance to outside entities, many colleges and schools of education have been required to submit documentation of their effectiveness in preparing teachers. Russell and Wineburg (2007) emphasize that educators in university-based programs must provide this credible evidence or risk losing ground to competitors such as alternative providers who are not connected to higher education. The issue that often arises, however, concerns which types of data should be used in the analysis of teacher preparation.

Assessing the effectiveness of a teacher preparation program is a complex endeavor. There are numerous factors that must be considered in determining whether the teacher who exits the preparation program is qualified, in his or her field of certification, to teach all children. Many entities at local, state and national levels attempt to measure teacher effectiveness, but often these studies produce narrow results because the focus is on limited sources of information. In order to provide more meaningful results, studies must take a more comprehensive approach and examine multiple sources of data, including teaching performance and student achievement. Russell and Wineburg (2007) identified organizations that have provided a strong foundation for effectively evaluating teachers and teacher preparation. These include the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS), the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC), The Renaissance Group (TRG), and the Standards-Based Teacher Education Project (STEP) initiated by American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE). As noted in the 2007 report, these organizations and initiatives provide a strong, research-based foundation for developing a meaningful evaluation process and their recommendations should be considered when assessing teacher preparation.

The focus solely on inputs or static measures such as syllabi and documents to assess effectiveness of teacher preparation programs shifted in 2000 to a more dynamic approach, one looking at performance measures that provide more meaningful results for reporting program performance, as well as provide more relevant data for institutions to use in program improvement. This paradigm shift occurred when NCATE revised its standards to be more performance-based and more focused on the standards' impacts on student learning. NCATE recognizes the need for a strong research basis for the standards and provides this information on their website and in their documents. They also recognize that it is vital to keep current with the recent research on teacher effectiveness and teacher preparation. As a result, the standards are reviewed on a regular basis to ensure relevancy.

Even though the profession has recognized and moved to more relevant and meaningful evaluation of the impact of teacher preparation on teacher quality and student learning, the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) has chosen to revert to a more static methodological approach, reviewing inputs (usually solely paper or web-based documents) as opposed to outputs or outcomes. For their studies, NCTQ chooses not to use a more dynamic approach of interviewing, observing, and reviewing and analyzing data on candidate and student performance. As a result, they are able to complete their studies quickly, and their studies have very limited utility for true program improvement and reform.

In the Illinois NCTQ study (Greenberg & Walsh, 2010) released in November 2010, the NCTQ selected only a very few programs from each teacher preparation institution for its focus. There was no consistency in the programs selected across institutions. Some institutions had two programs selected for review, while others had four or as many as five very different programs reviewed. Institutions were contacted by mail and told which course syllabi—selected from the courses relevant to any given program—“had to be” submitted. The course syllabi selected did not cover the breadth and depth of any of the selected programs. Student handbooks and a listing of ten school field sites and contacts were also requested for each program.

The NCTQ letters stated that programs would be evaluated based on standards; however, the standards being applied were not provided to the institutions until midway into the study. In addition, there was no research base to support these standards as effective measures of teacher quality, only the NCTQ's assumptions of their relevance and importance. NCTQ did not provide any background information or the credentials of any of the individuals who were conducting the program evaluations. The only contact with NCTQ available to the institutions was with a senior policy director, whose biography on the NCTQ website stated that the individual had taught for thirteen years and had completed an alternative certification MAT program.

Because there was no consistency in the programs chosen from each institution, the information collected to evaluate the effectiveness of program design was limited and not inclusive of all institutions. This limitation, however, has not prevented NCTQ from making global, sweeping, summative statements based on the limited data they collected. On the NCTQ website (Greenberg & Walsh, 2010), statements based on this minimal information about these limited selections of programs are posted, and claims are made that generalize this data to include every teacher preparation institution in the state. Examples of these unsupported over-generalized claims include “37- [the] Percent [sic] of secondary education programs in Illinois which require instruction in classroom management targeted to secondary grades” or “57—[the] Percent [sic] of special education programs in Illinois which require none of the elementary mathematics coursework recommended by experts.” It is difficult to determine how these percentages were calculated when only a select few secondary education or special education programs were part of the study.

These concerns about NCTQ’s methods and resulting claims were first raised by Eduventures (Eduventures, 2010) in a neutral third party external review of the 2010 NCTQ and Advance Illinois Study of Illinois Teacher Preparation Programs. In the review, the researchers at Eduventures found that the methodology used by NCTQ was flawed in several ways. One area of concern is the sole use of inputs to determine the quality of a teacher preparation program and its graduates. In addition, the list of inputs used to evaluate the teacher preparation programs was incomplete. Many relevant sources of information, such as quality of instruction, student support services, and teacher induction programming were omitted from the analysis. A third area of concern cited was the lack of a research base for the standards used by NCTQ to assess teacher education programs. As the Eduventures report notes, the only explanation NCTQ provides for the lack of a strong research basis is their unsubstantiated claim that there is not enough research done in the field of education. NCATE standards have a strong research base, which is clearly documented on the NCATE website; however, NCTQ has dismissed this source as irrelevant, with no further explanation of any kind. The Eduventures report also notes that NCTQ has weighted the standards with, again, no explanation of the logic of their decisions behind such weighting, valuing, or prioritizing. The validity of the NCTQ study is also questionable, since it is unclear how the data collected by NCTQ actually measure the standard(s) NCTQ has proposed.

The methodology used by NCTQ focused on convenience rather than substance. Ratings were changed (higher or lower) throughout the study, based on brief phone calls or additional information requested after the final submission of information. There was no logical support provided for these changes in methods of inquiry, and often the changes and calls for further information appeared to be arbitrary. Those programs which chose not to engage in telephone negotiations were immediately relegated to the bottom of

the stack of NCTQ “grades.” Because of the simplistic nature of the methodology employed, the superficial nature of the data collected and the misleading analysis, these results have very limited use for true program reform and must be considered—by anyone familiar with NCTQ’s methods and assumptions—as invalid, in light of these concerns. While we do not dispute the need for attention to reform, the NCTQ reports only provide a distorted picture of the character and quality of current teacher preparation programs.

What Can We Learn From This Study Going Forward?

Given the caution voiced at the beginning of this article, our recommendation is that, in careful consideration of how schooling in America might be impacted by reform efforts, serious reformers should genuinely question a self-appointed, non-expert group of critics promoting non-research-based reform efforts. To take such a group seriously, at face value, would seem to be a major error. What is at stake is an entire generation of school-aged children who depend upon society to act in their best interest. NCTQ alleges that their goal is to improve the quality of teachers in our schools, yet they avoid the hard work of even consulting the research that has already been done and which has concentrated on improving teacher preparation; and the NCTQ has similarly refused to engage in the equally challenging work of using this body of research to engage in further scientifically valid study to advance our knowledge of best practices in this field. The NCTQ does not present the research profile expected for meaningful reform efforts, and neither responsible educators nor the public can have confidence in the NCTQ’s unfounded pronouncements.

Theirs is a contrived agenda that is focused on promoting an essentialist’s viewpoint. It is a viewpoint that seeks to suggest that all variables regarding successful teaching must be seen as equal and unchanging. It denies the reality that student learning takes place within a myriad of unique contexts, e.g., socio-economic, developmental, and cultural, to name but a few. This simplistic approach belies the authentic contextual environment in which schools function. Student learning and how best to prepare teachers to advance this learning are complex and challenging fields of inquiry. NCTQ has not, at this point, engaged in any credible study that validates their work, that provides useful data and conclusions, or that liberates their work from its philosophical bias, premises and assumptions. Their analyses and conclusions are more designed to create a media firestorm than to improve teacher education.

There is work to be done to address the issues surrounding the conscientious reform of teacher preparation programs. Wang, Odell, Klecka, Spalding, and Lin (2010) state, “If teacher education is central to teaching reform and to the quality of teaching and student learning, as many including us believe, we need to invest still more in the conceptual, empirical, systematic, and sustained inquiry about teacher education reform.” The

work that NCTQ has generated shows no connection to such a comprehensive process of inquiry. Without applying standards of conventional research protocols to engage in the type of review described by Wang, the activities of groups like NCTQ will yield nothing but flawed and ineffective conclusions.

In their review of reform strategies, Sykes, Bird and Kennedy (2010) suggest

The prospect ahead is for steady work, as once was proposed for K–12 education (Elmore & McLaughlin, 1988), and for tinkering, greater attention to evidence of results, more modest aspirations, and a closer embrace of current practice as the place to start in working on more ambitious instruction with, not against, current practitioners.

We are in an era when reformers calling for the overthrow of current practice seem to advocate for the proverbial “throwing the baby out with the bath water” argument. It is time to work together on modifying our current practice, with new and useful research that points in the direction of best practice as we know it, rather than relegating current practice to the landfill.

In a climate of public discourse that is intensified by rapid and generally superficial coverage in the media, which seeks to sensationalize stories with condensed sound bites and headlines designed to capture public attention, this type of unsubstantiated and shameful attack on the work of educators is unconscionable. There is too much at stake to trigger confusion with such a shallow and unscientific assault on the work of professionals who have studied this field for many years and who are continuing to develop practical, research-based strategies to review and monitor effective educator preparation programs. It is important that the consumers of information about public education develop filters that sort out fallacious rhetoric unsubstantiated by facts and valid evidence. School children and their families depend upon us to do so. To fail in this mission is to undermine our efforts to create an educated and informed citizenry required in a democratic society.

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